

## Medievalism, Paganism, and the Tower Ravens

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### Abstract

The ravens in the Tower of London are allowed to move freely on the Tower Green, but their wings are clipped to prevent them from flying very far. They are widely believed to have been domesticated by Charles II in the seventeenth century, because of an ancient prophesy that Britain would fall if the ravens leave the Tower. In fact they were only brought to the Tower in the late 1900s, and the legend only dates from about the end of World War II. The Ravens appear to have been brought to the Tower by the Earls of Dunraven, probably because of an esoteric connection between them and the Celtic deity Bran, whose head, according to legend, is buried in the Tower. This article examines the legend of the Tower Ravens as a Pagan myth of the modern era, created when archaic beliefs, which were preserved as matrixes of motifs and associations, gradually resurfaced in a secular and Christian context.

The famous ravens at the Tower of London, which are visited by over two million people every year, run freely on the Tower Green, though their wings are regularly trimmed to prevent them from flying very far. Countless books and flyers tell visitors that the ravens nested in the Tower from time immemorial. They were then domesticated in the mid-seventeenth century during the reign of King Charles II, because of a supposedly ancient prophesy that “Britain will fall” if the ravens leave.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the first references to ravens in the Tower date only from the end of the nineteenth century, while the legend that Britain will fall if the ravens leave the Tower dates only from the end of World War II.<sup>2</sup>

The tale that the ravens were domesticated in the reign of Charles II

1. For one of countless examples, chosen almost arbitrarily, see: Kenneth J. Mears, *The Tower of London: 900 Years of English History* (Oxford: Phaidon: 1998), 78.

2. Boria Sax “Black Birds of Doom,” *History Today* 55.1 (January 2005): 38-39. Since writing this article, I have obtained new information that enables me to construct the origin of the legend in more detail, but the basic conclusions of the article are not affected.

and that Britain will fall if they leave is, however, far more than just another “urban legend.” Mircea Eliade defines myth as a narrative of “sacred history” which “narrates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of ‘beginnings.’”<sup>3</sup> By this criterion, we can consider the story of the Tower Ravens a modern myth, if perhaps a fragmentary one. It does not have many of the characteristics commonly associated with mythology. The story does not name, for example, any supernatural characters, nor does it provide archetypal models for human conduct. But, unlike the other attractions at the Tower, it takes place not in any fixed chronology, but at some undefined period when the nation was established. It does not simply recount a story of isolated human beings, but rather the destiny of an entire people.<sup>4</sup>

We can view the ravens as a revival of a Pagan<sup>5</sup> deity, which has unobtrusively entered the mainstream of secular and Christian culture. That has not happened through a deliberate Pagan revival, though occult practices have at times played a role. It has come about primarily through archaic associations that have resurfaced in the course of many decades.

### *Bran the Blessed*

In Cervantes’ novel *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, the aging hero remarks that the British believe that King Arthur had returned from the dead in the form of a raven. Nobody could tell which raven might be the legendary king, so a person that kills one risks murdering the legendary monarch.<sup>6</sup>

3. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Colophon, 1963), 5.

4. The “founding” of a nation or similar institution is far less a historical than a mythic event, which does not correspond to any specific date. Rome, for example, was said to be founded by Saturn, Aeneas, Romulus, and others. See Lucian Boia, *Pour une histoire de l’imaginaire* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1998), 168-74.

5. To define “Pagan” as “polytheistic” religion impresses me as not consistent with ways in which the word is generally used. For one thing, many types of Christianity such as Catholicism contain very strong polytheistic elements. In addition, religions that we usually consider “polytheistic,” such as those of ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, often contained similarly strong monotheistic elements. I use the word “Pagan” in a general sense simply to refer to religious traditions that are rooted in ancient beliefs and relatively distinct from Christianity, Judaism, and perhaps Islam. This is close to the original meaning of the term, which has been applied to many monotheistic creeds. For an excellent discussion of the ways in which the word developed, see Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede’s introduction to their collection of essays *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1-20.

6. Miguel Cervantes, *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, trans. J.M. Cohen (New York: Penguin, 1988), Part 1, ch. 13.

Arthur had become the protector of Britain, who was to ride out again in the time of his country's greatest need. Even Arthur, however, was something of an interloper, for he had usurped that role from the archaic raven-god Bran.

The raven is central in mythologies of people across the Arctic Circle, including Native Americans, Siberians, and Scandinavians. A raven deity has similar roles in many of the cosmologies of both the Old World and the New, sometimes as Creator of the world, the bearer of civilization, or the bringer of light to the world. It is entirely possible that all of these myths may be derived from a single prototype, a mythology, perhaps originating in Siberia, in which the raven was the central figure.<sup>7</sup>

In Celtic mythology, there is a wide range of raven deities, which may at one time have been a single figure. First of all, there is Lugh, a god of the sun. He is the inventor of the arts and sciences, and was identified by ancient writers with the Greek Hermes, the Roman Mercury, the Egyptian Thoth, and the Norse Odin. Then there is the Irish triple goddess of destiny known as the Babdh or the Morrigan, often appearing in the form of three hags or crows to foretell the fate of a hero in battle.

By far the most enigmatic of the raven deities in Celtic lands is Bran, the son of Lyr and the brother of the sea-god Manawydan. He is the deity most unequivocally linked with corvids, in fact the name "Bran" means "crow" in Welsh, "raven" in Cornish, Irish, and Scots Gaelic. A bit like the Greco-Roman Apollo and Dionysius who shared a shrine at Delphi, Lugh, whose name may also come from a Celtic word for "raven,"<sup>8</sup> and Bran sometimes seem to be different aspects of a single figure; while Lugh is a solar deity, Bran is more chthonic. His name is the origin of our word "bran," meaning kernels of cereal. The identification of Bran with earth may be due in part to the blackness of ravens, which is also the color of soil.

Bran may originally have been a god of mariners. For sailors of the ancient world, navigating without reliable maps or a compass, the presence of birds and the direction of their flight was an important means of orientation. One common way of learning the direction of land was to release a bird and see in which direction it would fly.<sup>9</sup> The favorite bird for this purpose was the raven, which had many advantages. For one thing, ravens are powerful flyers, capable of covering great distances. More importantly, their large, black forms would be clearly visible

7. Alexander H. Krappe, "Les dieux au corbeau chez les Celtes," *Revue L'Histoire des Religions* 114.2-3 (1936): 239-45.

8. Christopher R. Fee and David Leeming, *Gods, Heroes, and Kings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 71.

9. Krappe, "Les dieux," 244-47.

against the sky. Ravens were sent out to find land by Utnapishtum in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, by Noah in the Bible, and by Flokki, the Viking who discovered Iceland in 864.<sup>10</sup>

The story of “Branwen, Daughter of Lyr”, in the medieval Welsh collection of tales compiled by Lady Charlotte Guest and known as *The Mabinogion*, first established a connection between ravens and the Tower of London. It tells how the maiden Branwen marries Mallolwch, the King of Ireland, but then her husband humiliates her by forcing her to work as a scullery maid. She sends a bird with news of her misuse to her brother Bran, who launches an expedition to Ireland to retrieve her. Mallolwch and his entire army are killed by the invaders, but only Bran and seven of his followers survive the battle. Bran is wounded in the foot by a poisoned spear. He directs the survivors to cut off his head and take it back to White Hill in London, the site of the Tower,<sup>11</sup> to be buried with his face towards France. The severed head, which continues to speak, leads the warriors back to England.

The followers of Bran stop at Harlech Castle in Wales, where they spend seven years listening to the magic birds of the goddess Rhiannon. They then journey to the Island of Gwales, where they spend an additional eighty years feasting and drinking in the Otherworld. Finally, one of them opens a forbidden door, breaking the spell, and reminding the men of their mission. The survivors journey to London and finally bury the head of Bran in a place known as the “White Hill,” which is usually identified as the site of the Tower of London. England remains safe from invasions until the head is finally taken away.<sup>12</sup> The Welsh Triads tell us that the head was dug up by King Arthur, who wished to take the defense of the kingdom on himself. In this way, it was possible to explain the successful invasions by the Saxons and, most especially, the Normans.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Fisher King*

Bran continues to play a part in Arthurian legends as the Fisher King, the guardian of the Holy Grail.<sup>14</sup> He has been wounded with a lance and,

10. Ibid.

11. Tradition overwhelmingly identifies the White Hill with the site of the White Tower, though this is not explicit in the legend. Jennifer Westwood, *Albion: A Guide to Legendary Britain* (London: Grafton Books, 1985), 132.

12. Jeffrey Granz, trans., *The Mabinogion* (New York: Dorset Press, 1976), 66-82.

13. John Matthews and Caitlín Matthews, *The Aquarian Guide to British and Irish Mythology* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1998), 35-36.

14. Roger Sherman Loomis points out many close similarities between the legends

in the later romances, presides over a blighted kingdom, as he waits for a knight, Sir Galahad or Sir Percival, who can redeem both him and his land.<sup>15</sup> At times, the castle where it is kept is called "Castle Corbenic" or simply "Corbin," which means "Castle of the Crow." The castle may be, in various versions of the legend, located on a desolate coast, on an island, or in the middle of a dense forest. It is not found by seeking, but, if a knight sets off in search of the castle, destiny may lead him to it. Various locations have been suggested for the original castle that housed the Grail, including Dinas Bran, or "fortress of Bran," whose ruins may still be found in Wales.

Bran is not the central figure in any story, yet his presence is felt constantly through much of Celtic myth and the Arthurian legends. A sort of *Deus Absconditus*, he perpetually seems to be lurking in the background, as other gods and heroes take a central role. He helps others to achieve their destiny, whether it leads to triumph or tragedy. Together with such figures as Saturn, King Arthur, Frederick Barbarossa, and even Christ, Bran represents an archetype: the ruler who once presided over a golden age and is destined to return in times of peril.

There is actually nothing that unequivocally ties the story of Bran directly to the ravens in the Tower, but there are many suggestive parallels. Both the head of Bran and the ravens are said to protect Britain from invasion. Seven ravens are usually kept in the Tower today, six that are necessary to protect Britain plus an extra just in case. Seven is also the number of survivors that accompany Bran on his journey back to London, as well as the number of documented executions at the Tower. Finally, Bran was beheaded, even if it was at his own command, making him a sort of prototype for all the prisoners of the Tower that have been decapitated.

### *Barbaric Splendor*

The Victorians loved medieval pageantry, even as they ceaselessly castigated the cruelties and the narrow-mindedness of the medieval era. The French Revolution had initially been widely welcomed by wide sectors of British and European society at the end of the eighteenth century. When it degenerated into a reign of terror, which ended in the dictatorship of Napoleon, the disillusionment generated nostalgia for the feudal order. Medievalism was also a reaction against empirical science, which seemed to threaten the spiritual foundations of culture, just as surely as the

of Bran and the Fisher King in *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1963), 140-45.

15. Loomis, *Arthurian Romance*, 16.

French Revolution had threatened the aristocrats.

Most of the nostalgia for the Middle Ages centered on externals, for heraldic crests, ancient genealogies, elaborate ceremonies, costumes, and all of the colorful pageantry of the era. The medieval revival was led by Sir Walter Scott, who was widely considered the greatest living author of his time. He aspired to the life of a Scottish laird, building himself a neo-Gothic castle at Abbotsford in the 1820s and spending the vast royalties he received from his books to increase his lands. Many other people of means followed his example, and there was a great rush of castle building in the early nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> The revival also extended to the values of medieval times. For the nobility (and everyone that dreamed of being nobility), these included loyalty to one's Lord and a sense of *noblesse oblige* toward commoners. For the church, they included simple faith and piety. But the nostalgia was, above all, for chivalry, with its elaborate codes of honor and of courtesy towards women.

The celebration of the Middle Ages in nineteenth-century Britain was rarely uncritical. Even Scott could sometimes appear a little embarrassed by it. He wrote extensively of the superstitions and brutalities of the period, especially of the witch trials. Other popular writers on the Middle Ages such as Harrison Ainsworth would describe the tortures of the period in excruciating, even lurid detail. But the great paradox is that the chronicles of savagery did not inhibit but, if anything, served to feed the nostalgia. They blended with the pageantry, to give an impression of barbaric splendor. They also enabled modern people to indulge freely in nostalgia, without surrendering their sense of superiority.

But the chronicles of medieval barbarities could easily lead to revulsion, and, when it did, nostalgia would take other forms. There was also nostalgia for the pre-medieval world of Celts and Saxons. For those who thought much of the modern world utterly prosaic, yet also found the dogmas of the church too limiting, there was a flourishing of occult groups, such as the Masons, and neo-Pagan groups, such as the Order of the Golden Dawn. When agnostics or neo-Pagans dwelt on, and sometimes exaggerated, the cruelties of the Inquisition, Christian polemicists might respond with grisly descriptions of human sacrifice performed at Stonehenge or other allegedly druidic sites.<sup>17</sup> In both instances, however,

16. Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 29-54.

17. It is now generally accepted that the construction of Stonehenge was pre-Celtic, though it is possible that the edifice may have been used by Druids. In the nineteenth century, however, it was widely believed that Druids had used Stonehenge as a place for human sacrifice. See Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8-11.

focus on barbaric practices probably only increased the fascination with the past.

In the first two thirds of the twentieth century, the period in which the lore of the ravens in the Tower of London was established, it had become common for folklorists to interpret modern customs as survivals of ancient rituals, often with little or no evidence. Thus a sword dance that was started in the 1700s became an ancient rite of fertility, a reawakening of the earth. The hobby horse dance in Cornwall, actually from the end of the same century, was a Pagan celebration of the marriage of heaven and earth. Almost any reference to vegetation could, by obscure analogies with "primitive" practices, be made into some sort of archaic rite.<sup>18</sup> The legend of the Tower Ravens was not dreamed up by learned folklorists, but it was at least indirectly influenced by them. In the intellectual climate of the times, it seemed natural to regard the presence of ravens in the Tower as the remnant of very old traditions.

### *The Scaffold at the Tower*

A novel entitled *The Tower of London* by Harrison Ainsworth, first published in 1840, used the Tower of London as a setting for a Gothic novel. That was not terribly hard, since it really was a castle, the traditional setting for such stories, and, at least in parts, starting to fall into ruin. There were already tales of ghosts within its walls, and history provided a number of ladies in distress, including Anne Boleyn, executed by her husband Henry VIII, and Lady Jane Grey, executed by Mary Tudor. The castle of a Gothic novel contains labyrinthine secret passages and rooms, and these Ainsworth had to invent. This was a sort of setting in which ravens, eating corpses at the scaffold, would fit right in. Ainsworth mentioned in passing a "flock of carrion-crows and ravens" at the execution of Lady Jane Grey.<sup>19</sup> An illustration by George Cruikshank that accompanied the first edition of the novel had showed a large flock of dark birds gathering at the scaffold of the Tower for an execution.<sup>20</sup> The novel by Ainsworth strongly influenced the marketing of the Tower as a major tourist attraction in the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

18. Ronald Hutton, "Modern Pagan Witchcraft," in *Witchcraft in Europe*, ed. Bengt Ankloo and Stuart Clark (London: Athlone Press, 1999), VI, 30.

19. Harrison Ainsworth, *The Tower of London* (London: Frederick Warne, c. 1880), 481.

20. Christopher Hibbert, *Tower of London* (New York: Newsweek, 1978), 74-75.

21. Derek Wilson, *The Tower: The Tumultuous History of the Tower of London from 1078* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979), 229-37; Edward Impey and Geoffrey Parnell, *The Tower of London: The Official Illustrated History* (London: Merrell, 2000), 97-111.

Since being brought to the Tower of London in the late nineteenth century, the ravens have been associated with the “scaffold.” This is now a large brass plaque with an inscription stating, “On this site stood a scaffold on which were executed...” It goes on to list seven illustrious prisoners including Anne Boleyn, Lady Jane Grey, and Robert Devereux. In 1861, Prince Albert, on a visit to the Tower, had remarked that the queen would like to see the site of Anne Boleyn’s execution. This had actually been in front of the Ordnance House on the eastern side of the Tower, but a stone marking the site was set up in front of the chapel of St Peter Vincula. It immediately became a major tourist attraction, and in 1864 it was surrounded by railings.<sup>22</sup> By the early twentieth century, the site had been proclaimed to be the spot of a permanent scaffold and several beheadings.<sup>23</sup> The scaffold at the Tower of London evoked associations from the guillotine in Paris to a druidic altar for human sacrifice, and ravens added to the drama.

Ravens in ancient cultures such as those of Greece and Rome had been notorious for stealing sacrifices from the altar.<sup>24</sup> The association of the scaffold with Pagan altars reflected the Victorian view of history as perpetual progress from barbarism to civilization. Barbarities, as long as they were placed in the remote past, seemed to confirm a complacent view of current society by showing how far people had come. At the same time, they seemed to confer glamour on the descendants of both the victims and perpetrators.

### *Terror and Progress*

In the middle to late nineteenth centuries, the Tower of London was marketed to visitors as a house of horrors, not altogether unlike those at amusement parks, often with a great deal of showmanship. Yeoman Warders, dressed in medieval splendor, would invite tourists, including children, to place their neck on the chopping block or try on thumbscrews. Ladies might lie down on the rack, while gentleman could experience a moment of being locked alone in a dungeon.<sup>25</sup> To dramatize these terrors, particularly the executions, the ravens were used as a prop.

This emphasis on violence was also found in other public displays of

22. I am indebted to Geoffrey Parnell for many further details concerning the history of the scaffold, which he supplied in personal correspondence.

23. Impey and Parnell, *The Tower of London*, 111.

24. Boria Sax, *Crow* (London: Reaktion Books 2003), 43.

25. Peter Hammond, “‘Epitome of England’s History’: The Transformation of the Tower of London as Visitor Attraction in the 19th Century,” in *Royal Armouries Yearbook* (Leeds: Royal Armouries Museum, 1999), IV, 158-61.

animals during the era. According to the historian Harriet Ritvo, zoological parks of Victorian England were pervaded by the symbolism of power. First of all, they dramatized the might of the British Empire by exhibiting exotic animals, especially fierce carnivores such as tigers, as trophies. The animals might be deprived of food for a while, so that they would show their ferocity. They might be placed in cramped cages to dramatize their subjugation. On an even more general level, the parks dramatized the triumph of humanity over nature by displaying carefully tended gardens of foreign plants, laid out in deliberately artificial, geometric patterns.<sup>26</sup>

But if we consider the Tower Green with the ravens in this perspective, we see that the symbolism is in ways very different. The setting reflects the ideology of progress, but it reveals a more introspective side to the Victorians. The display emphasized the savagery of the ravens, said to have eaten the bodies of executed criminals. The political significance suggested by the ravens was a good deal more complex than that of captive tigers, since they did not dramatize the British conquest of distant kingdoms. Rather, it was a sort of self-conquest, the victory of progress over the cruelties of a remote age.

The Victorians had viewed history, especially their own, as the gradual triumph of civilization over barbarism, but they viewed that process with ambivalence. They constantly feared that civilization might lead to "decadence," that is, slackness, lethargy, sentimentality, and weakness of will. They saw a primal vitality in the supposedly primitive impulses, which were still needed to retain the country's greatness. This energy was represented by the ravens, which had to be controlled but not exterminated. But, as the ideology of progress was shaken in the twentieth century by wars of perhaps unprecedented brutality, the popular images of both the past and the ravens would have to change.

The parallels between the Castle of the Grail, ruled by Bran as the Fisher King, in legend and the Tower of London in modern times are remarkable. If we compare the two edifices, the Grail has a central role analogous to the Crown Jewels. The Knights of the Grail resemble the Yeoman Warders, with their medieval uniforms. Furthermore, the obsession at the Tower of London with torture, execution, and imprisonment suggests that it, like Fisher King's Castle, seems to be under a sort of a

26. Harriet Ritvo, "The Order of Nature: Constructing the Collections in Victorian Zoos," in *New World, New Animals: From Menagerie to Zoological Park in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. R.J. Hoage and William A. Deiss (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 43-50. See also Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in Victorian England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

curse. In both edifices, there are sins of the rulers that must be expiated for the kingdom to achieve full prosperity.

### *The House of Dunraven*

The first visual depiction of a raven in the Tower of London appeared, without comment, and seemingly almost by chance, in a special supplement on the Tower of London that appeared in the newspaper *The Pictorial World* on 14 July 1883.<sup>27</sup> The bird is located near the site of the plaque commemorating the executions in the Tower, and it is placed near what seems to be a sign telling of the scaffold. About two decades later, the Japanese novelist Nastsume Soseki wrote a phantasmagoric story of the Tower of London, in which those once executed in the Tower come back in the form of ravens.<sup>28</sup>

An early description of the ravens in the Tower, from an essay published by Henry Thompson in 1904, describes them thus:

Rising on to Tower Green under the old plane and elm trees, the five pet ravens may be seen in ominous proximity to the site of the Block. This was where the keen blade of the masked executioner made history in brief and brutal chapters, and many noble heads rolled within the encircling chains. The ravens, which haunt the locality with dismal croaks, are a private gift to the Tower, and should one die it is replaced by the donor.<sup>29</sup>

The passage seems calculated to arouse our curiosity. Why do they keep ravens? And who is that mysterious donor?

The first substantial account of the ravens in the Tower comes from George Younghusband, who wrote in retirement after having worked as Keeper of the Regalia at the Tower of London for several decades. Introducing the ravens to the public in *The Tower from Within*, published in 1918, Younghusband begins, "Round and about the site of the ancient scaffold, or sitting silent on a bench near by, may be seen the historic ravens of the Tower."<sup>30</sup>

27. John O'Connor, illustration to a special supplement on the Tower of London, *The Pictorial World* (14 July 1883): 51. I am indebted to the Guildhall Library in London, which is where I found this illustration. After an exhaustive search in many libraries and archival collections, I have been unable to find any earlier references, either visual or in print, to the Tower Ravens.

28. Natsume Soseki, "The Tower of London," in *The Tower of London*, trans. Damian Flanagan (London: Peter Owen, 2004), 91-116.

29. Henry Thompson, "The Tower of London," in *Living London*, ed. George R. Sims (London: Cassel: 1904), 12.

30. George Younghusband, *The Tower from Within* (New York: George H. Doran, 1918), 14.

Younghusband tells that the current ravens were provided by "Lord Dunraven."<sup>31</sup> At the time, this would have been Thomas Quinn (1841–1926), the Fourth Earl of Dunraven, who was nearing the end of a very active life. In his youth the Earl of Dunraven had experimented with spiritualism and attended many séances with his father. Though too politically astute to speak often of ghosts, he always remained convinced of their reality, about which he would publish a book on occult powers shortly before his death.<sup>32</sup>

Thomas Wyndham, a prominent Welsh aristocrat, was a patron of the romantic Celtic scholar Iolo Morganwg, whose real name was Edward Williams, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In a draft of an elegy to Thomas Wyndham, written in 1814 and preserved in the National Archives of Wales, Morganwg calls Dunraven Castle "the residence of princes and the place where the Christian religion and its inseparably attendant civilization first obtained an entrance into the Islands of Britain...,"<sup>33</sup> doubtless referring to a legend, recorded in the Welsh Triads, that Bran had brought Christianity to Britain.<sup>34</sup> In 1818 Morganwg had written to Countess Caroline of Dunraven, daughter of Thomas Wyndham, stating unequivocally that the primary castle of Bran had been the original Dunraven Castle in Glamorgan.<sup>35</sup>

Morganwg was a highly learned but dubious source, who is now known to have forged several ancient documents and poems in ancient Welsh, which were an important impetus to the revival of Druidism.<sup>36</sup> It is easily possible that Morganwg may have been trying to ingratiate a wealthy patroness. However that may be, the first Earl of Dunraven selected the ruined castle for the site for a palace that he began to build in 1822.<sup>37</sup>

In his next book, *A Short History of the Tower of London*, Younghusband gives one further intriguing hint as to the origin of the Tower Ravens:

31. Ibid.

32. Windham Thomas Wyndham Quinn Dunraven, *Experiences in Spiritualism with D.D. Home* (Glasgow: Society for Psychical Research/R. Maclehose, 1928).

33. Iolo Morganwg, draft of "To the Memory of Thomas Wyndham of Dunraven Castle..." 21 December 1814, The National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, IOLO MORGANWG 1 (B) 110/22.

34. Lady Charlotte Guest, *The Mabinogion: A Facsimile Reproduction of the 1877 Edition* (New York: Dover, 1997), 385.

35. W. H. Wyndham-Quin Dunraven, *Dunraven Castle, Glamorgan: Some Notes on its History and Associations* (London: John Murray, 1926), 14.

36. Prys Morgan, "The Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 83–86.

37. Dunraven, *Dunraven Castle*, 14–15.

It would be of historic interest if those whose ancestors have suffered at the Tower would send from their home successors to the old ravens, as they die off, and thus maintain a very old tradition in a manner well in keeping.<sup>38</sup>

The statement is mysterious, especially coming from such a normally straightforward author. Why, specifically, people whose ancestors had suffered at the Tower? What might this tradition commemorate? Younghusband apparently thought of the ravens as a memorial to those who had been martyred, perhaps even as the spirits of the dead.

If Younghusband was implying that a relative of the Dunraven household had been martyred in the Tower of London, he was probably misinformed. Many early members of the House of Quinn, which would eventually become the House of Dunraven in the early seventeenth century, were Jacobite sympathizers, but they had been also politically astute and had avoided prosecution. But the Earls of Dunraven believed that Bran had been an actual person, the original king of Siluria. By having their own castle, Dunraven, built on the site of his allegedly major fortress<sup>39</sup>, the Earls were claiming Bran as at least a spiritual forebear. Could it be that the Dunraven family thought of the ravens as avatars of Bran the Blessed?

### *Protectors of the Realm*

The legend that Britain will fall if the ravens leave the Tower appears to date from the summer of 1944. Correspondence preserved in the National Archives reveals that at that time representatives of Watney's Brewery in Pimlico requested that the Tower give them a raven to replace their raven-mascot which had died, since the workers believed the raven protected them from bombs during the Blitz.<sup>40</sup> I think it likely that the raven may have been used as a spotter for enemy planes.

As the war progressed, the government had mandated a complicated system of coded sounds—patterns of pips, silences, and continuous rings—to be used for various kinds and degrees of danger from bombs. This was designed to enable people to evacuate efficiently without panicking, but it could be cumbersome. The Brewery workers were forbidden to use their own sirens in 1939. They tried blowing whistles to signal danger instead, but that was prohibited as well.<sup>41</sup> The ravens might

38. George Younghusband, *A Short History of the Tower of London* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1926), 14.

39. Dunraven, *Dunraven Castle*, 14.

40. National Archives, reference # WORK 14/2394.

41. The codes, and the changes in them, are recorded in various signs that were

simply start calling out in fear, thus undercutting the government directives but saving workers the trouble of deciphering complex messages in times of emergency. The workers in the brewery could have noticed this behavior in the ravens and used it as an alternative warning system. They would, however have refrained from talking very readily about it, as it would have seemed odd and, more significantly, would have involved flouting the procedures mandated by the authorities.

The Stag Brewery, owned by the Watney family, a large structure not far from government offices, had already been struck by bombs several times.<sup>42</sup> Though people at the Tower chuckled, the idea that a raven could provide protection in the event of bombs is not absurd at all. Researchers are now intently studying the apparent abilities of animals to sense disasters in advance. The Chinese, for example, have observed the behavior of goldfish in an attempt to predict earthquakes. Many observers reported that animals seemed to anticipate the Indonesian tsunami of 2004, retreating in advance of the flood. Ravens are attuned to the sky and to currents in the air, a quality they do not necessarily lose when their wings are clipped. They have excellent sight, and often seem to be aware of approaching predators or cars before people can spot them. The agitated movements of the raven could have warned brewery workers of approaching planes, before human observers could spot the dangers. At any rate, the request for a raven was refused by the Tower authorities, but the associated belief in the ravens as protectors seems to have been transferred from the brewery to the Tower and the country itself.

### *Conclusion*

The beliefs associated with the Tower Ravens may have been influenced by the tourist industry, as well as by the customs and prejudices of their time, but they also involve perennial religious themes such as resurrection and tribal destiny. They represent one of the few instances in which the genesis of a myth can be largely reconstructed. The myth takes its ultimate inspiration from an archaic deity, and it is plainly Pagan in inspiration, yet it developed in a context that was both secular and Christian. Many of those who participated in the creation of this myth (for example Morganwg) were consciously trying to revive a lost heritage. They accomplished that much, but, ironically, never in the way they intended. Almost

posted in the brewery, which are preserved the City of Westminster Archives, reference # 789/599/4.

42. John Watney, *Beer is Best: A History of Beer* (London: Peter Owen, 1974): 109.

without notice, the motifs and associations from remote times not only survived, but slowly surfaced and eventually overwhelmed the Christian overlay. The archaic heritage addressed persistent, though not fully conscious, needs.

Were the ravens brought to the Tower by chance or destiny? That is one question that no research is likely to decide, so readers may answer it for themselves. The history of the ravens in the Tower could be understood in a vast number of ways, from the rebirth of a god to an insignificant piece of commercial propaganda. But, considered as a means of organizing experience, a story transcends its interpretations.

Accordingly, I will close not with answers, but with a series of questions which are raised by the history of the Tower Ravens. Where else besides the Tower of London are major elements of archaic religion gradually coming, almost unnoticed, to the fore? Is Paganism, understood in a broad sense, now becoming the majority religion of Europe and parts of North America, having gradually overwhelmed and absorbed the heritage of Christianity, Judaism, and secular Humanism? To the extent that this may be so, how might avowed Pagans deal with the temptations and opportunities of their new status?

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